

REJOICE!

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Third Sunday of Advent 2011

The word for this week is rejoice. The choice this week is simple. This is Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is Latin for rejoice. Gaudete Sunday is the mid point of Advent and is marked with a rose colored candle and if we had them, rose colored vestments.

Why is rose the color of the day? The traditional color of Advent is purple and the color for Christmas is white. When you mix equal parts of purple and white together you get, not pink, but rose. Pink is the result of mixing white and red and is a different shade.

Rejoice means: to be glad; take delight (often followed by in): to rejoice in another's good fortune as well as our own. Synonyms include revel, exult, glory. Just as behold means more than look or see, rejoice means more than just being happy.

There is much to rejoice about at the readings of this week. However much of the rejoicing comes as a mixed blessing. Just as we achieve the color for today by mixing two different colors, the rejoicing is colored by the mixing of joy and challenge. God often seems to work this way.

The author known as third Isaiah writes our passage today from Isaiah. This large book is most likely the work of two if not three authors. The setting for all of Isaiah is the fall of Jerusalem, the Babylonian exile and the return to Jerusalem after Cyrus the Persian conquers Babylon. Third Isaiah is writing in the time period after Cyrus the Persian has conquered Babylon and promised to free the Israelites and allow them to return to Jerusalem.

So Isaiah and the people are rejoicing because they are now free, but there is a catch. They are free to return to Jerusalem, they have prayed for this for a long time and now the reality is beginning to set in. They are leaving one of the great cities of the world to return to a small city that has been devastated by war and left in ruins for many years, several generations in fact. This is one of those be careful what you pray for moments. They rejoice that they are free, but now their freedom comes with a price of many years of hard work and sacrifice to rebuild their city of Jerusalem.

I imagine some did not rejoice all that much and many may not have wanted to accept God's gift thinking, well maybe I will just stay here in this beautiful city, the only place I have ever lived. Sometimes we have these moments when presented with a gift of God where we think gee thanks God, but this isn't exactly what I had in mind. Maybe I will pass.

This is where the Magnificat comes in. The priest has the option to use the Magnificat, the Song of Mary or a psalm. I chose the Magnificat, because this is such a great example of a person rejoicing at an unexpected gift from God.

The setting is a few months after the angel Gabriel has told Mary just what God has in store for her and she has agreed. She goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth who in her old age is also miraculously pregnant with a baby who will become famous as John the Baptist.

When Mary enters the room the baby that Elizabeth is carrying jumps in her womb and Elizabeth says, “Of all women you are the most blessed. Mary responds with what we now know as the Magnificat. The way we read it today is the form in which it appeared in the early church and is one of the oldest Christian hymns that we have.

However Mary shows her Jewish roots for this hymn is very close to the Song of Hannah. Hannah an older woman who has never had a child has been at the door of the temple day and night praying. Praying so much and acting so strange that Eli accuses her of being drunk and tells her to go away. She tells her that she is praying for a son and has promised God that she will dedicate him to the temple if God will hear her prayer. Eli tells her that her prayers will be answered. When she becomes pregnant she responds with what is known as the Song of Hannah 1 Samuel 2. Hannah does present the child to the temple and he grows up serving at the later. This child will become the prophet Samuel.

Hannah while finally blessed with a child by God’s grace must give the child up for service. That was her promise, yet when learns she is pregnant she rejoices even though this is a mixed blessing.

Both women rejoice that God has looked with favor on them, regardless of the outcome. Mary knows that she has been blessed just like Hannah. Yet one must wonder what difficulties all of this would bring her as an unmarried girl of maybe 16 or so.

Today we have heard of how God blessed the nation Israel when they were freed to leave Babylon even though this blessing also brought great challenge. We have heard about Mary and Hannah who give birth to miraculous children. We have not even talked about John who rejoices in his role as the one who prepares the way for the one who is to come. All of these are blessed, but the blessing carries a challenge. The blessing is not without some downside.

This is often the way it is with God’s blessings. I am often blessed to be present in situations that many may not consider blessings. The difference is that I have learned to look at these situations as a blessing and I rejoice that I can be there at the time in that way.

Whether this is standing by a hospital bed as a person draws their final breath or sweating in the sun in Central America on a mission project. These are all moments of blessing. Blessing because there is something important that needs to happen and by God's grace I can help.

Ministry is a blessing and a joy, but that does not mean it is all fun and games. In fact ministry, the ministry that we all do is hard work. But when we hear of the lives touched, changed, saved, then it is time to rejoice.

All of the people we have talked about today were offered a blessing by God. A blessing that had joy and challenge. What all of these have in common is that the person said yes to the blessing. Not only did they say yes, they rejoiced at the blessing and took that joy into the work they were called to do. For in each and every case, through the trials and tribulations that blessing brought serving God was ultimately worth the effort.

Of course we all have a choice. Individually and as a parish we can reject the blessing and walk away. We can stay safe and secure and avoid the pain that may come. We can accept the blessing and complain about it. Or we can accept the blessing like Mary and say My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

We as a parish are blessed with the opportunity to make a difference in peoples lives or we can look at the world and say, what a mess, what can we do. We are blessed with the message of Christ to spread in a world where many are not interested or have walked away. We can complain or we can choose to rejoice at the blessing that we have.

The choice is yours and ours.